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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000057

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SUBJECT: PACE PRESIDENT MANIPULATED BY REGIME DURING VISIT

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Classified By: Classified by DCM Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Belarusian opposition leaders and civil society activists continue to communicate disappointment regarding the recent visit to Minsk by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Rene van der Linden. In contrast, top GOB officials and state media seem pleased with the visit and highlight their high-level visitor's preference for engagement over isolation. The PACE president made some effort to press GOB officials on the need for political and other reforms, but the regime ensured that the masses heard only the conciliatory elements of van der Linden's message. End summary.

PACE Visit Raises GOB Hopes...

¶2. (C) On January 18, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) President Rene van der Linden Belarusian arrived in Minsk for discussions with GOB officials and opposition representatives. During his visit, van der Linden proposed facilitating dialogue between Belarus and the West by opening a Council of Europe (COE) office in Minsk and making more use of existing COE mechanisms, including the Venice Commission. As a show of good faith, van der Linden proposed to his GOB interlocutors that the authorities immediately release all political prisoners in Belarus. (Note: German Ambassador Hecker, apparently an old friend of van der Linden, was involved with the visit, but in private discussions with the Embassy did not seek credit for it. End note.)

¶3. (U) Following his meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov, van der Linden told journalists that he observed in the Belarusian government a commitment to guarantee stable energy supplies to Belarus and to develop close relations with the COE. Van der Linden publicly told Martynov that the Belarusian parliament was not ready to join PACE because of Belarus' current human rights situation. However, state television broadcasted a heavily redacted interview - where, for example, van der Linden's statements about political prisoners were left completely untranslated -- that highlighted the PACE president's conciliatory tone and his observation that most GOB officials with whom he spoke seemed "more open" to better relations with Europe. He expressed hope that his visit would bring Belarus and the European Union closer following the recent energy dispute with Russia (reftel).

¶4. (C) In general, top leaders of the Belarusian parliament

appeared sanguine following their meetings with van der Linden. For example, Belarusian Council of the Republic (upper chamber) Chair Gennadiy Novitskiy complimented van der Linden as an interlocutor "who can not only hear but also listen" and who sincerely wishes "to find understanding between Belarus and European institutions." House of Representatives (lower chamber) Chairman Vladimir Konoplev declared that the GOB was "open for dialogue" and promised to show van der Linden the "true Belarus." Martynov described his meeting with the PACE president as focused on cooperation.

...But Disappoints Pro-Democracy Forces

¶5. (C) Belarus' opposition leaders and civil society activists, on the other hand, seemed ambivalent, if not dissatisfied, following their meetings with van der Linden. Opposition United Civic Party Chair Anatoliy Lebedko expressed surprise, relating that he had expected the PACE president to visit Minsk "not all at once" but after consultations with PACE members and the External Relations Commissioner. Noting that van der Linden had suggested the creation of a Council of Europe (COE) information center in Minsk to facilitate EU-GOB discussions on Belarusian human rights issues, Lebedko insisted that such a high-profile COE presence should become manifest only after the release of political prisoners, changes to the Electoral Code, and the development of civil society in Belarus.

¶6. (U) Expressing strong pessimism regarding gradualist strategies for promoting democracy in Belarus, opposition leader and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich characterized the PACE president's visit as an ill-timed "hand of cooperation" to the regime. According to

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Milinkevich, van der Linden's presence in Minsk reaffirmed Europe's optimism about the regime "taking its own steps" toward political reform. Similarly, while delivering a list of Belarusian political prisoners to van der Linden, human rights defender Vyacheslav Sivchik expressed hope that the PACE president's visit "does not signify support for the regime's oppression" and called upon PACE to stipulate release of political prisoners and democratic reforms as conditions for Belarus' COE admission.

¶7. (C) Seeming to concede some criticism from the opposition, van der Linden noted that the regime had failed one of the conditions of his visit by not permitting him to meet with imprisoned opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) Chair and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. (Note: Another key precondition was the opportunity to meet with opposition leaders, civil society activists, and religious activists. End note.) Kozulin's wife, Irina Kozulina, publicly described her meeting with the PACE president as "friendly" and indicative of the EU's commitment to the Belarusian democratic opposition. However, BSDP Deputy Chair Vladimir Nistyuk later revealed to Poloff that Kozulina and the BSDP leadership were deeply disappointed by van der Linden's "lack of appreciation" of conditions in Belarus and described the PACE President as just another "political tourist."

Comment

¶8. (C) We do not know van der Linden and would assume that he is generally well-intentioned. However, the democratic forces' negative reaction to his visit is understandable. The PACE president's unambiguous plea for Europe's engagement with a dictatorial regime smacks of appeasement. Van der Linden tried to drive home the point that Belarus should immediately release all political prisoners and make other political reforms to demonstrate the regime's readiness to close the gap with Europe. However, the GOB reaffirmed its reluctance (if not refusal) to heed such calls by blatantly

manipulating or simply deleting van der Linden's comments.
One of the few benefits of van der Linden's visit is that
senior GOB officials received the message again - albeit in
diluted form - that the West remains serious about the need
for the release of all political prisoners. That said, it
would be better for Lukashenko and his cronies to get
unambiguous indications of European disdain rather than
easily manipulated platitudes about "dialogue."
Stewart